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Amnesty: Sandinistas abuse opponents

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LONDON — The Sandinista government of Nicaragua is carrying out a campaign of "intimidation and harassment" against its opponents, Amnesty International says in a major report on human rights abuses in Nicaragua released today.

The 36-page report by the London-based international human rights organization also reports torture and killing of prisoners by the Nicaraguan resistance forces, but focuses on the conduct of the Sandinista government since it is a signatory to international legal conventions on human rights.

"Leaders and members of political opposition parties and their affiliated trade unions have been subjected to arrest and short-term imprisonment in what Amnesty International believes to be a pattern of intimidation and harassment," the report says.

Most arrests were carried out under the state of emergency in force since March 1982. Amnesty notes that most prisoners were released before their cases came to trial, and prisoners of conscience wrongfully convicted have been pardoned "with few exceptions."

"However, some trade union and political party leaders who Amnesty believes to have been prisoners of conscience have been detained repeatedly, sometimes for a year or more," and subjected to questioning at the state police's "Casa 50" office.

"Many short-term detainees have reported that interrogators threatened them with further, prolonged imprisonment without trial in the custody of the State Security Service, or trial under the Public Order Law, as a consequence of further independent trade union or political party activism."

The report cites as an example Nicaraguan journalist Luis Mora, whose arrest for disseminating "anti-national information" prejudicial to national security in April

1984, allegedly in a broadcast on Costa Rica-based Radio Impacto, was protested by Amnesty.

He was held incommunicado for 25 days, tried and sentenced to nine

years' imprisonment but pardoned in September 1984. He was arrested and tried again last year. Amnesty regards him as a "possible prisoner of conscience."

Amnesty said the government was taking "arbitrary measures aimed at intimidating members of the legal profession who oppose government policies."

Habeas corpus is supposed to be the primary remedy in Nicaraguan

law against arbitrary detention and prolonged detention, said Amnesty, but in spite of rulings from the Supreme Court that judges should have access to prisoners in state security cases, the organization found the doctrine had sometimes been flouted.

Conditions inside prisons were reported to be poor. Released prisoners told of a disorienting regime in which lights are left on continually, or turned on only at mealtimes or when they are to bathe; in which water or food is withheld, or extra meals provided — "apparently to make prisoners believe more time had passed." Deprivation of sleep, banging on doors at 10-minute intervals, enforced calisthenics or standing have been reported.

Theoretically, the State Security Service is under civilian control. In practice, said the report, its actions "under the state of emergency and suspension of most civil rights appear to be largely unrestricted by the judiciary or any other civil authority."

"Amnesty International was concerned that in other cases the State Security Service appeared to have fabricated evidence and to have manipulated the government news media in order to denigrate political opponents, and justify to the Nicaraguan public their detention and prosecution."

Amnesty cited in particular the case of Father Amado Pena, a close friend of one of the church's strongest critics of the government, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. Amnesty said Father Pena was falsely implicated in criminal activity, imprisoned and released in 1984.

The organization acknowledges that some military personnel have been convicted and punished for abuses of prisoners, including murder and rape, but some killings and "disappearances," particularly in rural areas, have not been confirmed.

The report details killings, disappearances and the forced resettlement of thousands of Miskito

Indians on the Atlantic coast over recent years, but notes that although many allegations of ill treatment were never investigated by the courts or executive authorities, an appeals court did release or reduce the sentences of political prisoners in 1982.

The latest amnesty law, approved last April — combined with talks about regional autonomy for Miskitos — brought about an informal truce or cease-fire between government and Miskito forces for much of 1985.

Last year, Amnesty reported, the government also modified its long-standing compulsory relocation policy on the Atlantic coast and many residents of the Coco River area returned with some government assistance.

"Compulsory relocation of rural populations, however, remains an element of government policy in response to the continuing armed conflict. A major relocation program was announced in March 1985, which is reported to involve some 7,000 Mestizo families from mountainous areas of Matagalpa and Jinotega departments in which opposition forces had been active."

As for anti-government forces, Amnesty took a particular swipe at the Honduran-based Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN), who have been frequently reported killing and torturing prisoners. Witnesses and deserting FDN personnel have given Amnesty detailed testimonies of such activities.

"The number of captives tortured and put to death by FDN forces since 1981 is impossible to determine, but is believed to total several hundred," said the report.

Amnesty's criticism of the United States focuses on the much-publicized CIA field manual supplied to the Nicaraguan resistance, which talked about "neutralizing" civilians believed to have collaborated with the Nicaraguan government and "the use of violence for propagandistic effects."

"Widespread publicity about the 'Psychological Operations' manual, and detailed reporting of continued cases of torture and murder of captives attributed to FDN and MISURA [another resistance group] forces in the course of 1985 have resulted in little apparent change in the operational tactics applied by these forces," Amnesty said.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb said the Reagan administration has previously denied such allegations and declined further comment.